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Michele Devitt: Marian Library Oral Histories

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University of Dayton
Marian Library

Marian Library Oral Histories: Michele Devitt

Date:	20 June 2019
Interviewees:	Michele Devitt
Interviewer:	Kayla Harris
Recording by:	Ryan O'Grady

00:00:04 [Kayla Harris]

This interview is being conducted as a continuation of the Marian Library's 75th anniversary oral history project. The interviewer is Marian Library Archivist Kayla Harris, video recording is being done by Digital Projects Manager Ryan O'Grady, and our narrator today is Michele Devitt. Today is Thursday June 20th 2019 and we are in Roesch Library. So thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project, could you please introduce yourself and your position at the Marian Library?

00:00:34 [Michele Devitt]

I'm Michele Devitt and my position is Curatorial Assistant and Coordinator of the Volunteers.

00:00:40 [Kayla Harris]

And what first brought you to the Marian library, and when was it?

00:00:47 [Michele Devitt]

In 2001, a year after we moved here from Wisconsin, I volunteered to help with the nativity collection and I was teaching art at the same time and coaching swimming and raising four children. So, the amount of time I had was not as much as I wished I had, but I volunteered in helping design some of the sets and create some of the settings because of my art background.

00:01:11 [Kayla Harris]

Was there someone who connected you with the opportunity to volunteer here or how did you find out about...

00:01:21 [Michele Devitt]

I had joined the national organization called Friends of the Crèche and met Father Roten through that. And so, and I knew that he was here and that there was a collection here, we actually... When we lived in Wisconsin we drove down to visit my husband's family two hours north of here then we made the two-hour trip to come specifically to see the exhibit, which at that time was held out at St. John's Gallery at Mount St. John, which is also a Marianist property. And after seeing that exhibit that I was very envious that it was, you know, such a beautiful thing but I was so far away and so when we moved here, I knew that I wanted to be involved. And then I started working as a staff person in 2012 and had been contacted when the position was created, asked if I would be interested and I was very interested.

00:02:14 [Kayla Harris]

So did you have any previous connections to the University of Dayton and prior to that, like as a graduate or family members or-

00:2:23 [Michele Devitt]

No, no because we were new in town so I had no connection, but I myself am a crèche collector so that was my interest and I did proceed to come here as a student to work on my art education degree and get my certificate to teach art.

00:02:50 [Kayla Harris]

And what other...I know you mentioned as an artist and raising children, could you just talk a little bit about some of the other types of work that you've done, whether that's professional or volunteer before coming here to the Marian Library?

00:03:05 (Michele Devitt)

Yeah, after college I was a youth minister at a Catholic parish and then a campus minister at several community colleges in Phoenix, Arizona, and then took time to raise our children and then when I came back to my second career it was teaching art so by that point I really I've always been an artist and just really wanted to have a job where I could continue to express myself artistically and teaching seemed like it would work well with the schedules of having four children and trying to be involved in their lives so that was my next career path.

00:03:45 [Kayla Harris]

Do you find that some of the skills or experiences you are acquired in those areas have impacted your work here?

00:03:52 [Michele Devitt]

Oh most definitely, definitely the artistic experience and the desire, the desire to be creative and the youth ministry and my degree was actually in outdoor recreation so a lot of program planning and volunteer management...working with different kinds of organizations. And then I have a master's degree in pastoral ministry and that was from the University of San Francisco, so some of the theological and religious background having had that degree also is helpful with what what I do now.

00:04:36 [Kayla Harris]

So now talking a little bit about what you do at the Marian Library. If you want to describe either some main jobs that you do, or what a typical day might look like even though I know that could be difficult to do... to the best that you can?

00:04:50 [Michele Devitt]

Yeah there's not too many typical days, but I guess one thing that happens every day is answering emails and that's probably my least favorite part. I more enjoy the putting together exhibits so we have people who request to borrow nativity sets or art. So trying to put together and make suggestions for what would meet the needs of the patrons who are making those requests and then putting together exhibitions for art the art gallery we have in the Marian Library, or putting together the nativity collections for the different venues, I really enjoy doing that.

My favorite thing is if you put a set in front of me and I create a setting and have the chance to do the artistic work and also managing the volunteers who do that kind of work also, is great having the consultative role for those volunteers it is wonderful and I think it's a great environment with people who are there because they want to be there and just sharing their time and their talent is a big part of the day. Tuesdays, we have volunteer Tuesday and we typically have 12 to 18 volunteers who come in. A majority of them are adults who are retired and they're from all walks of life and they come because they love the nativity and they also love the people that work together and we sit around and have lunch every Tuesday and that's just a time for them to connect with each other. Some of them live alone, and some of them are in some way connecting back to what they did in their career but some of them this is just very different than what they ever did. So that's uh I guess that kind of describes yeah but what the days can be like there's also meetings and being connected with the library staff but since our building is separate from where the library is actually located the connection is really through the meetings when I have to come over here to to be with other staff.

00:06:54 [Kayla Harris]

So you mentioned helping people select artwork from when the artwork is loaned out. When people come to you do they typically have a specific piece in mind or how does that process work?

00:07:10 [Michele Devitt]

They typically do not have a piece in mind. They typically come over and I ask them to bring pictures of their space and kind of have the measurements of where.. if it's a wall or a table or shelf you know where they're gonna put the art. Typically the first thing they say is "well the color of our office is blues and greens so we want something to match the office" and so I redirect and remind them that this is Marian art, and they need to think about what expression of their faith and the mission of their office do they want the artwork to relay? So that kind of puts them in a different mindset and I tell them that you know we are a library and if they kind of browse the shelves, we have photographs hanging from each piece of art so they can look at the pictures and get an idea if it's something that appeals to them or not. And then if they know, I mean if they have some input, then I can direct them to where those kinds of pieces might be so I try to find out...do they want something contemporary or something traditional...do they want black and white...do they want something very colorful...do they want something with scripture included in it. So I try to get a little bit of an idea and typically they don't really know so if I then show them some examples that helps them to be drawn to a particular style or something that speaks to them. And then they pull out all the things that are of interest and we kind of try to narrow it down to what you know what will work together, so that's kind of another thing if they pulled out a lot of different things, it's trying to find out a way to fit it all in the office space.

We had a lot of people who are very in tune with one of the current trends at the university which is inclusiveness and being mindful of various cultures and inclusive of those cultures, so looking at Mary represented in different cultures is very important and we have a lot of that artwork that now has gone into offices so I think that has been really a blessing. So we have things from Asia and we have things that are Native American Madonnas and you know your typical European Caucasian Madonna is just not the only one in our art collection, so that's kind of fun to see that people are drawn to other faith expressions through the culture.

00:09:37 [Kayla Harris]

Yeah that was going to be a question, like if you notice any sort of commonalities in types of things that people are drawn to?

00:09:42 [Michele Devitt]

Yeah it is and we're finding a lot of offices now have big bare walls, so these offices have been remodeled and people come in and you know they want 20 pieces of artwork. So we try to do some groupings and collaging and it's... it's very doable you can take smaller pieces of artwork

and combine them into a collection on a wall and we do kind of differentiate between loans and exhibitions. So an office can take what we have as some predetermined exhibition collections, so that might be where we have twenty or more pieces from one artist and they can take maybe five or ten of those and put them together on a wall. And that exhibition then is something we encourage them to invite other people on campus to come to that space, and to see and for them to explain why they chose this and we give them information about the artists and whatever information we have on how we acquired the artwork, or what was the artist statement... what was the motivation behind creating that artwork. So we try to give them whatever we know, so that when people come to their office they can help educate and share their art with others.

00:10:59 [Kayla Harris]

In the time since you've been here how would you say that most of the art ends up in the collection?

00:11:07 [Michele Devitt]

Most of it is donated. My guesstimate is about 80% of our collection is donated and sometimes people purchase it but donate it to us right away, and sometimes they do that because they know of a theme that's coming up. Typically our purchases are when we're putting together an exhibit and there's a component of the message we want to convey that is missing. So maybe we have, we're doing Africa and we might have five countries that we don't have a piece from, so then we might purchase something that looks different than what we already have and represents a country... or if we're doing a theme, like we've put together an exhibit of nativities that showed animals that were outside of your typical animals or there were a lot of animals in the settings or just maybe a little bit more curious animals like bison and armadillos and anteaters and things like that. So from different countries they represent these animals because that's part of what's there in their country, so we put together sets that were exhibiting animals and so in a case like that if there was something that we felt we were missing then we might order a piece or borrow a piece or purchase something.

00:12:29 [Kayla Harris]

So the art component of the Marian Library's collection is relatively newer compared to like, say some of the books that we have. And so, if a lot of these pieces are donated, how do people find out about the Marian Library? How do they know that if they're doing artwork related to Mary, that it makes sense for them to come here? Is it through some of the relationships that people have built and this community of artists...or how would you categorize that?

00:13:00 [Michele Devitt]

I would say on campus as people go around campus and they begin to see that other people have artwork and those people are talking about their artwork. So word of mouth has been a great

way. We also on our website, we post some of the artwork that we acquire as we acquire it and we also post the exhibitions that we do, whether they're here on campus or elsewhere so people can see the visuals. We use porches also like for the nativity season and so we put out a loan process on how people can borrow nativities... but I'm going to say word-of-mouth is really the most and seeing people going into other offices and they see just some of the beautiful things and ask questions like "where did you get that?" and "oh you've got to go over to the library" and you know so yes and some people have said "Gee, I've worked here for a long time I didn't know that we could borrow artwork from you" so it is, it is neat and that has really increased in the last six years. Because my thinking is, if you have beautiful artwork you don't want it on a shelf. And as an artist if I take the time to create something, I want it to be enjoyed by people and to be seen, not to sit on a shelf in storage. So as long as a piece is not in real fragile condition, then it should be out, and it should be viewed and seen and enjoyed and appreciated. And especially when our art expresses an element of faith, I think it rekindles in people an opportunity for them to share their faith and to think about their faith

00:14:40 [Kayla Harris]

In your own artwork is their particular medium or style that you commonly work with?

00:14:49 [Michele Devitt]

I am a jack-of-all-trades, because I was an art teacher I dabbled in a lot of different things..have done a lot with ceramics and stained glass, and mosaic-stained glass pieces and painting. I used to do oils now I'm more into acrylics just because it dries faster, that's a simple of a reason and cleans up better, and I've done yeah I've done a lot of other things. I enjoy making nativity sets so I've made quite a few that are part of my own collection and given some as gifts.

00:15:24 [Kayla Harris]

Another coming question is that you work a lot with the Marian Library's collection nativities of in addition to the artwork, and so do you have or collect any of your own nativities. Could you describe some of them?

00:15:39 [Michele Devitt]

Well a lot of my nativities are ones that my children gave me, so you can imagine a child's budget. So I have some that are from the dollar store but they are very there are some very beautiful inexpensive ones. As my kids got older and I didn't, it wasn't paying tuition anymore, then I was able to start purchasing some of the ones that I drooled over for many years. Ones that were from other countries and handmade, you know wood carved sets from Africa and there just are some that were given to me by people as gifts so my family, extended family knew at Christmas time that a good idea for a gift for me was a nativity set, and our family travels. If I

saw a nativity set I would try to buy one from, from a trip with a memory attached to that particular trip. And like I said I've made some of them, and some of the ones that were gifts or ones that I purchased, I have created kind of a setting, or maybe made a stable or some kind of environment for them to be displayed in.

And for a while I was collecting miniatures just because of the amount of space that it takes to have a collection and so I have a couple of little like cubical boxes, like if you know what a printer's boxes is, where they would put their little printing stamps in, so they're very small spaces and those have nativities in them. So I have found creative ways to exhibit them. I am enamored with boxes so I have a lot of my nativities enclosed in boxes that are I mean they're open the boxes are open, but you've got the surrounding box, and this past year when we hosted the national meeting of the Friends of the Creche I had 16 white boxes on my turquoise accent wall in my living room and in each of those was a wooden nativity from somewhere around the world and that was kind of a neat way, so in addition to the collecting of the nativities I'm very interested in how they are exhibited and how they're presented for others to see. And some of that will be shown this year when we do our exhibit here at the library we are focusing on how the volunteers are involved in the collection and the maintaining of the collection, so we are going to do in the gallery where we are choosing and exhibiting nativities and boxes. And as a way to kind of inspire people, because some people think that the nativity set that they have is so common and they don't have or they've never had something really precious, but I think every nativity is precious and sometimes you can take the common aspect of it and present it in a way that makes it more special. So I just thought we would you know show some ways that people who are visiting might consider for exhibiting their own pieces.

00:18:45 [Kayla Harris]

Is there a particular setting that you've worked on either for your personal collection or for the Marian library that was the most challenging?

00:18:50 [Michele Devitt]

Oh boy, um it's challenging working with glass and I've done.. probably the one that was the most challenging and also very fun was one that I made where I took glass bottles and slumped them. sS it's putting them in a kiln, for instance I took a green Heineken beer bottle and you put it in the kiln and it begins to bend and you don't know how long that's going to take because that's commercial glass so it's a matter of guessing. So I put it in the kiln and luckily when it came out it was bending so it was the shepherd as he was bending just a little bit forward and then I took clear perfume bottles very miniature and bottles that I put in the kiln also, and they melted down and those became the lambs and the sheep. And then I did Mary was made from a blue I think that was a oh.. who had the blue beer bottle.. is out of Columbus. Budweiser! I

think it was a Budweiser bottle! Anyway so I did beadwork and wire work to create Mary and then had a Chianti bottle and that I put in the kiln and it just went flat so that became the stable for the background, so anyway that one was really fun and sometimes when you're working with glass you have to expect happy mistakes, you know you hope they're happy mistakes, and if they're not you just do it again and try a different time setting or temperature setting to slump the glass. So that one was challenging but fun and I've exhibited that one at a couple of national conventions and was just dusting it last night so that's why it's fresh in my mind.

And then in the art collection you know like there's not one that's my favorite because it changes, but one of the ones that I really, really, love is, it's made by the Nahuatl Indians from Mexico, and it has as the base the figures are clay and then it's smeared with beeswax and then there are thousands of tiny little beads pressed into that beeswax in patterns and designs so some of the figures maybe all the way around the, the bottom of their robe would be little duck figures all around and some of them have flowers so it's not just beads randomly put on them but there's this beautiful design and as the pieces are contoured you've got the you know, lines where the arm touches the body so those in. And the beads just perfectly are in there, I mean the symmetry is gorgeous, the amount of detail and knowing that it probably took, I would guess 10 to 20 hours per piece to put these little beads on, so to me as an artist I'm very appreciative when I see work that I know took a lot of time so that's one that I have always really really enjoyed.

00:22:14 [Kayla Harris]

Is there... so that's kind of your favorite or current favorite nativity, is there a piece of art or object that you would say is your favorite in the collection?

00:22:26 [Michele Devitt]

Oh that's hard because...

00:22:29 [Kayla Harris]

Or style

00:22:31 [Michele Devitt]

Sometimes when I see well I tend to enjoy contemporary art, and not necessarily abstract but contemporary, and I was raised in Hawaii, so Hawaii is a very colorful place and we always wore very colorful clothes so I'm very drawn by color. So pieces of art that are colorful are really special to me, and we just received some prints by the artist named DeGrazia who is from Arizona, and he paints figures some of them have faces but many of them are faceless but they are Native American and somewhat, somewhat abstract figures. I mean you can tell by the shape but he doesn't have the detail for instance of facial features but received a couple of beautiful Madonna and nativity prints so that's the most recent acquisition that I just have really, really

enjoyed. And then another thing there's an artist, her name is Sarah Hall, and she has done some abstract artwork related to Mary and they are currently on exhibit at the Curran Place which used to be River Campus, and I just found out... I featured them in my weekly email to the volunteers just because I enjoyed them and we had a conversation about one of the pieces. And after sending it out, somebody who received the email sent me a message back telling me that she also this woman commissioned some, was commissioned to do some stained glass windows at St. Andrews Catholic Church in Columbus, and that is the church where my daughter is getting married on July 6. So in two and a half weeks, and I was just there last month going to Mass with her just kind of looking, eyeing out the space and the decorations and the flowers and everything, and I saw the windows but now that I know who did, who did the artwork, I just can't wait to go back. I'll have to really focus on the ceremony rather than the windows, but anyway so it's really cool when connections you know are made like that, it just makes you appreciate the artwork, the artist, and then the work that I do, I just feel like I have a wonderful job and that feel very blessed to do what I do.

00:24:55 [Kayla Harris]

The next question. What do you find to be the most fulfilling part of your work with the Marian Library?

00:25:03 [Michele Devitt]

Definitely working with the volunteers. aAd helping them to become involved in the artwork and nativities and to see their delight, and helping anybody appreciate the artwork that we have in our collection, is is wonderful. I feel very blessed to have been mentored by both Father Roten and Sister Jean, who were, Sister Jean was my predecessor and she taught me a lot about the collection and certainly organized the collection in many good ways that it was easy to carry on the work that had been started. Working with the volunteers is wonderful because they all are just very loving and giving people, we have people who when they see we can't find anymore pens, we need more pens, the next day here's the pens you know, they bring it in. Or we are out of a certain color of paint, somebody goes and purchases the paint for us, so I mean it's it's little things but it's the gesture of love that is just so evident and these are just very wonderful wonderful people so it makes it a delight to work with them.

00:26:22 [Kayla Harris]

I understand you sometimes have get togethers outside of the work of the Marian Library whether that's going to a movie or a garden party. Could you talk a little bit about that?

00:26:35 [Michele Devitt]

Well we do we do some things just because I know people enjoy socializing and a lot of the work that the volunteers do provides an opportunity to sit around the table, I mean they wrap

thousands of little nativity figures every every Christmas season, and then they come back. And then we already are starting, so Christmas is six months away but we already are wrapping things to go out for next Christmas so it's really a year-round job even though people think "oh you get busy at Christmastime" but, but we've started earlier just so that when the season comes and we're ready to deliver we're not in such a pinch. And it gives us more opportunity to take our time, and be careful with things. And as we are wrapping, when we see something needs to be repaired, or paint is chipped, or something that needs to be glued, then we can get those done in a timely manner.

I think there's the opportunity for them, then as they're doing, which some that work is tedious... they can talk about whatever they want to talk about, and so for some of them you know it's the first contact they have if they're living alone and they come in and join us. It's their first contact of the day with someone else and, like I say, the people are so delightful so they talk about their families, their grandchildren, their travels, their difficulties with health issues. We pray before lunch and we always, you know, ask what intentions people have and keep keep people in prayer.

So it really is a community and I think the Marianist spirit and the mission of the Marianists is so evident in a very... started out subtly, you know, you didn't have to say what we're doing, but it definitely is evident in what we do.

00:28:24 [Kayla Harris]

Is there anything else that I didn't ask you about your work that you feel is important to communicate about the work you do and the volunteers for the Marian Library?

00:28:36 [Michele Devitt]

Well I think we've discovered over the years that as artwork was received... so some of the collection has been in our possession for you know over a hundred years, I mean we have some things that were donated or given with the Marianists being missionaries in various countries, sometimes as a thank-you they were given statues or rosaries or medals. So a lot of that came in before a time where people were really recording all of the information that maybe could have been gathered about the piece. So we're trying to backtrack and do some research to find out as much as we can about the pieces we own. And that's really what makes it interesting, if you have a story that goes with it. So I would say that that work has become a little bit more evident and we have a lot of that is done by several student workers. We also have recognized to be responsible in loaning out our artwork, we want it to be in good condition, but we also want to make sure the transporting of this artwork is done well. So wrapping the pieces is important and then insuring them. So if we have outside companies that are transporting the work it's it's important for us to let them know the value of those pieces. We've had a few, you know,

accidents when things have been on the road, and that's to be expected over the many thousands of miles that the artwork travels. and the thousands of pieces that, you know, travel every year. So we're trying to really be diligent about having a good and accurate insurance value on artwork as we send it out. So that's been something that I've put a lot of effort into recently.

And always trying to recruit new volunteers. So we've had several volunteers past in the last six, seven years since I've been here and we always, you know, want to have other people come in and and be there, so yeah that's a kind of a constant. And most of our volunteers are friends of a volunteer, somebody who's had personal contact. About four years ago we put a notice in a couple parish bulletins and that brought in some some really good people. And luckily we're not at the point... so it's not that we need massive numbers of volunteers, we just need that steady stream which we have right now. So our volunteers are very committed, and continue to come and we have about another ten people on the list who come occasionally, and people who said that they want to come but maybe they're still working or they have other issues that prevent them from coming very often, but we're we're just always open to having people if they, you know, want to help us out.

Then another thing that we've tried to do is to have a good experience with docents for when we have tours. So the docent training, and preparing the materials, so that docents have something to say about the artwork. And I always kind of start that process by telling people if there are five to ten pieces that you are passionate about, and you can say something of interest, you know that's really the place to start. Because when people come in they don't want a five-minute talk about every single piece you have. Their attention span isn't that long and you just want to draw them into a couple of pieces. So if you choose the ones that you are most interested in, then when you talk about it you're going to be animated and you're gonna have a story. And sometimes the volunteers can even share, you know, this piece was broken and I was the one who fixed it, and this is how I did it. Or this piece, you know, started out just as five pieces and we created an environment for it. So they might talk a little bit about that process.

We have a woman now who's been looking online. We have a rubber duck nativity, and so we are creating the setting for it, so we're currently looking for about an eight inch beach umbrella for this setting. So when I was in Utah last month I shared that I was looking and this lady I was with took me to three places that might have it. So it's kind of nice to get talking about some of the needs that you have and going online we can find a lot of things now through the internet so the search is really fun, you know, when you know what you're, what you're looking for. And we have two, what we call, walls of inspiration. So a lot of people donate craft items and supplies to us so when we start to create a setting, we go to that wall of inspiration and just kind of look at "what do we have" and "oh this would look good" and "this would look good" and we kind of pull the materials together and set them out on a table. So there is a process, you know, of kind

of the design, and even sometimes when we start out in one direction, we turn corners and go a different way because of whatever, you know, a different material came, or a different idea came to us, or a thought, you know. So it's it's fun the process of doing the designing of the settings is really a lot of fun.

And the challenge is, how do we store everything? So as we acquire more things we have to be more creative in the way we store, and and put things in tighter spaces safely so that you don't damage the artwork, but you really fill the space well.

00:34:04 [Kayla Harris]

And how are things stored currently?

00:34:06 [Michele Devitt]

Well we store things in archival boxes. We wrap them in acid-free tissue paper for storing, but then when it's going to be sent out we take that item and open it up again... make sure that it's clean and everything still in good condition. Wrap it back in that tissue, then put it either in a bubble wrap or wrap it with bubble wrap, and then use string to close the bubble wrap and then we put them in boxes with, we use airbags and styrofoam peanuts, and more bubble wrap just to really surround the pieces so that nothing gets broken.

And we store flat art...some of it is stored, and most of it is stored upright, especially if it's framed. So we just have to be careful that there's something in between so they're all in acid-free bags and sometimes there's cardboard in between if they have an ornate frame or something that's a little bit more fragile about it. Some of the artwork that isn't framed is stored flat, and there are a few framed pieces that are stored flat for various reasons, so it just kind of depends on, on what it is. So we have a lot of shelving and we have crates and totes of all shapes and sizes, and the volunteers, a couple of our men will oftentimes make specific crates for a specific piece of artwork. We just try to think of the practicality of transporting, and storing, and most importantly, keeping the piece safe is really what it's all about.

00:35:49 [Kayla Harris]

The Marian Library celebrated its 75th anniversary last year in 2018. What would you like to see for the future of the Marian Library in the next 75 years?

00:36:00 [Michele Devitt]

That's an easy one. I would love us to have a museum where a lot of the artwork could permanently be displayed. And I would love to see the collection continue to grow. And I think really the direction of what people are asking for is more contemporary artwork, and as I mentioned, the cultural expressions of Mary and the Holy Family. So with the nativity sets we do

have about 100 represented so I would love to see the countries that we don't have, I would love to see us acquire nativities from those countries. We currently are tracking to see how many of the 50 states we have a set from, so I would like to see that we get something from all 50 states and preferably something handmade by an artist of that state so we're looking at that, and that's not a high priority but it's something now that when we have a little bit of time we're putting together this list and seeing what we can do to kind of complement what we don't have in the collection. But yeah, I think a museum with a collection as unique as ours is with Mary statues and with nativities I think people would come from all over to look at those collections, and I think that we definitely have the size of a campus, and the opportunity here. I think, I think we've got people who could back this, and the interest, so yeah I would love to see a museum in my lifetime, so not 75 years from let's say 25 years, I'd like that to see that be a reality.

00:37:48 [Kayla Harris]

Great well thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. Michele it's really important that we kind of document some of the stories by the people who make the Marian Library's collections as they are, so thank you again.

00:38:03 [Michele Devitt]

You're very welcome. It's my pleasure.